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## The Use of Mirroring for Couples Exploring Attuning, Intimacy, Empathy, and Attachment Through Dance/Movement Therapy: A Literature Review

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**The Use of Mirroring for Couples Exploring Attuning, Intimacy, Empathy, and  
Attachment Through Dance/Movement Therapy: A Literature Review**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Dance/ Movement Therapy

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## **Abstract**

This literature review attempts to address the complex nature of couples work using a dance/movement therapy (DMT) intervention technique called mirroring. This is explored to see if mirroring can advance a couple's level of attachment, intimacy, empathy, and attunement. The literature review gives an overview of topics such as couples therapy work, DMT, dance/movement therapy for couples (DMT-C), attunement, attachment theory, intimacy, and empathy. The review concludes with a discussion surrounding the DMT intervention of mirroring. The methodology applied focuses on DMT-C as a treatment modality to bring focus on using the mirroring intervention to build attachment and attunement. This therapeutic intervention strategy was designed for couples who have varied attachment styles with the hopes that it will increase intimacy, empathy, and attunement amongst the couple seeking services.

*Keywords:* couples, attachment theory, attunement, intimacy, dance/movement therapy, dance/movement therapy-couples, mirroring, somatic mirroring, empathy, and kinesthetic empathy.

## Introduction

As the field of dance/movement therapy (DMT) emerged within the United States in the 1940s (ADTA, n.d.), it set to establish that movement is language and is a means for therapy. Movement connects a person to their body, mind, and spirit, and is not only a form of assessment but also a tool of intervention to increase a client's ability to connect. In couples counseling, clients seek therapy for several reasons such as to improve intimacy, build conflict management skills, improve communication, confront emotional disconnect, and build trust (Doss et al., 2004). DMT and couples counseling seek similar goals through overlapping interventions in theories like the Imago method (Hendrix et al., 2015). While their objectives may be similar, little research has been done on the overlapping of the two types of therapy. This literature review attempts to bring awareness to the overlap of the two therapies by discussing the use of the dance/movement therapy technique, mirroring, and how it can be used within couples work to improve a couple's level of intimacy, empathy, attunement, and attachment.

DMT and dance/movement therapists have been using the mirroring technique for several decades as a method to build rapport and enhance emotional understanding amongst the relationship between a client and therapist or amongst group members in a therapeutic setting (McGarry & Russo, 2011). In more recent conversation and studies, there has been an increase in discussing interweaving the two topics of body-movement and couples therapy work (Shuper-Engelhard & Vulcan, 2018). With the use of body-movement and couples work, this has led to additional research around couples therapy and DMT together as it relates to neuroscience, emotional regulation, embodied attunement, attachment models, and kinesthetic empathy enhancement (Lacson, 2019; McGarry & Russo, 2011; Shuper-Engelhard, 2019; Wagner & Hurst, 2018).

According to research conducted by McGarry and Russo (2011), couples may be able to use the DMT technique of mirroring to engage in enhancing the empathetic understanding of the other party through the movement feedback system that involves the use of the mirror neuron circuitry. Enhancing an empathetic understanding among couples can bring about a closeness between partners and increase emotional regulation, which are key variables to marital or couples, satisfaction (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019b). However, the literature and research that has been conducted and presented around these topics is limited in relations to dance/movement therapy (McGarry & Russo, 2019). Research terms included in this literature review are as follows: attachment theory, attunement, couples therapy, dance/movement therapy, dance/movement therapy with couples, empathy enhancement, intimacy, and somatic/kinesthetic mirroring.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review tries to state the need and urgency for the DMT community to conduct research on the application and instruction of mirroring between partners. The use of mirroring holds the potential to enhance the couple's understanding of each other through attunement and empathy, while creating a safe/secure attachment. Through building secure attachment, it can enhance intimacy regardless of whether a professional helper such as a therapist or counselor is around.

### **Couples Therapy**

In life, each person will experience some form of a relationship with another person whether this be with a parent, a friend, a lifelong partner, etc. Having a close satisfying relationship is essential for one's health and happiness. When there is a lack of close relationships, it may predict one's response to stress and stressors (Popovic, 2005). As the definition of relationships has changed over time for Western society, "divorce rates have been

found to be on the increase” (Popovic, 2005, p. 38). With these rising divorce rates, research shows that only around one-fourth of divorcing couples seek professional counseling to improve their relationship and only about ten percent of married couples seek professional help for relationship problems. In their study, Doss et al. (2004) sought to determine why couples seek marital counseling; factors included financial concerns, job stress, wanting to improve the relationship, or something more extreme, such as a marital affair.

There are several couples therapy theories, interventions, or coaching programs available for exploration in addressing couples’ concerns. Therapy theories include Behavioral Couples Therapy, Emotionally Focused Therapy, Gottman Method, Imago Method, and Sensate Focus Technique. Behavioral Couples Therapy is known as a broader term for couples' therapies that use behavioral techniques based on principles of operant conditioning (Fischer & Fink, 2013). Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), which is rooted in the science of emotions and attachment, is a humanistic, evidence-based approach to psychotherapy with the purpose of facilitating the creation of secure, vibrant connections with self and others (ICEEFT, n.d.). Sensate focus technique is a technique that is considered a foundational technique for sex therapy. It uses a hierarchy of structure touching and discovery suggestions to identify psychological and relationship factors that contribute to sexual difficulties (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019a). The Gottman Method of couples therapy research focuses on autonomic arousal in conflicted interactions that may play a part in predicting the future measures of the happiness of the partners in the relationship. In addition, research for this method has shown that couples who are involved in conflict will often display a mode of “survival responses,” either actively or passively, and as a result, empathy may be limited amongst the partners (Shuper-Engelhard & Vulcan, 2018).

The Imago method, which is a non-DMT method, is designed to increase empathy by practicing empathic sensitivity, listening and communication, while suspending one's own thoughts and feelings (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019b). The Imago approach is a method that has worked on bringing awareness to the importance of focusing on the body in couples therapy (Shuper-Engelhard & Vulcan, 2018). Methods such as the Imago method integrate the use of breathing exercises, while emphasizing the importance of maintaining eye contact and the use of mirroring in echoing a partner's words to calm the psychological system (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019b). The use of this method and these exercises are used in a way to better regulate a partner's autonomic system in a situation of conflict (Shuper-Engelhard & Vulcan, 2018).

### **Dance/Movement Therapy**

The American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) (n.d.) defines dance/movement therapy "as the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual, for the purpose of improving health and well-being". DMT is a holistic approach to healing that connects the body, mind, and spirit (ADTA, n.d.). The ADTA believes that movement is a vessel for language, and language begins when people are in utero and will continue throughout a person's lifespan (ADTA, n.d.).

DMT stemmed from early theorists in the 40s and 50s to support and heal clients with psychological disturbances via movement (Lykou, 2018). DMT origins are based on ancient dance rituals throughout various cultures. DMT is a therapeutic vessel that can be used for individuals, couples, families, and groups (ADTA, n.d.).

### ***Dance/Movement Therapy with Couples***

Dance/movement therapy for couples (DMT-C) work remains marginalized as it has only been explored and written about by a few dance/movement therapists (Wagner & Hurst, 2018), but is growing in its body of research (Shuper-Engelhard & Vulcan, 2018). In DMT-C, the goal

is to raise awareness of the individual's sensory experience in the interaction and the spouse's experience (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019a). DMT makes for an ideal treatment model for couples seeking an alternative form of talk therapy, as DMT uses nonverbal work for expression, a form of powerful communication. The use of this technique provides a safe space for couples to explore their problems and process what comes up for them (Shuper-Engelhard et al., 2019). Research has shown (Shuper-Engelhard & Vulcan, 2018) that those who participate in DMT-C have experienced synchronization, mutual attunement, a positive impact on the relationship, and an increase of kinesthetic empathy. In addition, those who engage in movement therapy as a couple report higher marriage satisfaction, higher empathy, and a more secure attachment (Shuper-Engelhard & Vulcan, 2018).

While the research of DMT-C is lacking due to the difficulty of academically writing about non-verbal processing, there has been recent clinical literature on the use of body movement in couples therapy work (Shuper-Engelhard & Vulcan, 2018). In 2017, Wagner and Hurst began work on creating a theoretical framework for bringing couples work and DMT together (Wagner & Hurst, 2018). Cunningham (2014) explored the potential benefits of DMT for clients who were experiencing infertility in Europe and aimed the research focus on whether more research should be conducted for this particular population. Using a qualitative method to conduct the research, the results showed that the population is emotionally vulnerable and embodying the emotions they felt helped the clients live to their full potential. This would suggest that dance/movement therapists can assist clients in a healthy way of finding embodiment and kinesthetic empathy with their partners, but it also suggests that more research needs to be done through considering couples as a dyad (Cunningham, 2014).

Non-verbal content in a couple's session is essential to the process of diagnosis and becoming familiar with couple's needs. In relationships a primary mode of communication is



through somatic and kinesthetic connections. Through these processes of non-verbal communication, the individuals see, hear, process, interpret, and respond to one another (Shuper-Engelhard & Vulcan, 2018). However, according to Shuper-Englehard (2019b), the researcher remarked that it is important to have a mix of verbal and nonverbal conversations.

Therapists working within the realm of DMT-C, may invite a couple to investigate emotional content using their body, by trying out different ranges of movements with different qualities. Through this exploration of movement, it could encourage the couple to gradually learn how they need one another and place a sense of security in the relationship (Shuper-Engelhard et al., 2019). One way to do this was suggested by Wagner and Hurst (2018) in their development of bringing a theoretical framework to practice in DMT-C. They suggested palm-to-palm interactions that explored the Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP) tension flow dances, which plays with the use muscle tension in the body (Kestenberg Amighi, 2018). They suggested playful experiments with movement such as patty cake, pressing, and playing with leading and exploring to allow the couples a chance for connection and eye contact, which can arouse the desire for intimacy (Wagner & Hurst, 2018).

DMT/DMT-C work is often conducted through non-verbal processing. Shuper-Engelhard et al., (2019) focused their research on the nature of therapists' verbal interpretation during therapy. Their study examined when and how a therapist transitions from movement to verbal content and when therapists should be engaged in their own intervention versus gathering non-verbal expressions from the body. For this research, fourteen couples were recruited, ranging in ages twenty-seven to fifty-five and shared the same household with their partner for at least three years. They had to participate in twelve DMT-C sessions and were randomly assigned to one of four therapists. Each of these therapists had a PhD in the field, with over ten years of experience, and were experts in the Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP) for movement diagnosis. In

sessions, couples were invited to share their concerns through verbal and non-verbal means. The therapists would then invite the couple to engage in spontaneous and structured joint movement that would engage the couple's conflicts and fears. Through the research of twelve sessions three themes became known in the findings. First was when the narrative was perforated the therapist would make connections between action and sensation, emotion, and image in relations through mirroring to build between partner's bodies. Second, when the past is reconstructed in the present, identifying and naming roles and transgenerational implications manifest in the body. Therapists suggest a link between the couple's embodied past and their actions in the relationship with their partner. Finally, when conflict intensifies, instructions to explore psychodynamic resources in the relationship dynamics. When conflict arose, the therapist invited the couples into kinesthetic and somatic investigations to be a resource for somatic well-being and a sense of security (Shuper-Engelhard et al., 2019).

This study highlighted creating connections between the body and the mind through verbal and non-verbal interventions. The invitation to move provided couples with the space to physically experience the non-verbal dynamic of their relationship. However, sometimes the couples would know what they needed from their partners but were not able to identify the emotion or feeling that led them to their need. It was the position of the therapist to build connections for the client between their body's experiences and movement, to the partners response (Shuper-Engelhard et al., 2019). This increased the need for therapists to use verbal and non-verbal themes in client's sessions.

How therapists helped build these connections for clients was by using observation tools such as the Kestenberg Movement Profile. Therapists help couples discover underdeveloped movement patterns within themselves, each other and in the interpersonal realm. Dance/movement therapists are trained specifically in movement analysis such as Laban

Movement Analysis (LMA) and KMP (Lacson, 2020). Couple's dance/movement therapists used the KMP lens to assist couples in unresolved rhythms, such as the fighting, more muscle tension movement, rhythm and unresolved indulging, less muscle tension movement, rhythm (Kestenberg Amighi, 2018). For couples, working with a DMT therapists, who have an awareness of these rhythms, can help increase self/other acceptance of the various tension flow rhythms (Wagner & Hurst, 2018).

### ***Attunement***

Attunement begins in infancy as the caretaker accurately reads the child's nonverbal cues. For adults this continues in romantic relationships as attunement is achieved through the ability of partners being able to accurately read non-verbal cues and respond in a way which the other partner feels seen, heard, and understood (Lacson, 2020). In DMT, attunement looks at the understanding of another's body movements (Lacson, 2020). Dance/movement therapists practice attunement to lead to an understanding of the body on an empathic level that reaches deeper than verbal connection (Lacson, 2020). Lacson (2020) identified two types of attunement, affect attunement and rhythmic attunement. Promoting infant social awareness and producing more gazing time, smiles, and positive vocalizations is known as affect attunement. Rhythmic attunement is when the caregiver attunes to the baby's rhythms and actions fostering kinesthetic empathy. One hypothesis considers affective attunement is reached in the mirror neuron system through the forms of imitation and observation (Castro Jaramillo & Panhofer, 2022).

### ***Empathy***

Empathy allows a person to take another's viewpoint and understand the intentions behind their actions (McGarry & Russo, 2011). Shuper-Engelhard (2019b) defined empathy as the ability to identify another person's mental status, intentions, experience, or viewpoint. Further, Lord (2016) describes empathy as the ability to step outside of oneself, interpret, and

respond to another's state to alleviate suffering. According to Lord (2017), any successful couple requires empathy and compassion for one another. When looking at marital satisfaction among couples, empathetic understanding is a key component in helping couples change patterns in the individual behaviors. Empathetic understanding is also key for the couple's behavior as it can help promote and bring closeness and emotional regulations to the partners and their relationship (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019b).

Kinesthetic empathy involves embracing the feelings of others either through non-verbal communication or movement (Castro Jaramillo & Panhofer, 2022). Empathy research stresses the role of having a kinesthetic component in order for couples to understand their partners' intentions (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019b). "Kinesthetic empathy is a vital concept in romantic relationships since it deepens emotional comprehension from an embodied perspective" (Castro Jaramillo & Panhofer, 2022, p. 219). Kinesthetic empathy generates a common space of experience in which each member of the couple can share their subjectivity, while supporting individuality (Castro Jaramillo & Panhofer, 2022). Through research, Castro Jaramillo and Panhofer (2022) found that kinesthetic empathy arose out of four actions amongst couples: relaxation, self-awareness, bodily self-attunement, and somatic mirroring.

### **Attachment Theory and Couples**

Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby and colleagues (Bowlby, 1982), was created to understand the bond between children and adults and how it also applies to adult relationships (Johnson, 2019). Attachment theory demonstrates that children eventually learn how to be available and approachable adults as attachment theory plays a key role in adult relationships in creating mutually supportive relationships (Grau & Doll, 2003). Hazan and Shaver (1987) suggest romantic relationships are a part of the attachment process that is not only biological but also social. These relationships are experienced differently by different people based on their

various attachments. The way adults exhibit attachment in their relationships is based on the attachments developed in early childhood (Grau & Doll, 2003). Attachment theory explains how at least some forms of love develop and how the same underlying dynamics that all people experience can shape different social experiences and relationship styles (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

In the mid 1900s, Bowlby and Ainsworth discussed that humans are born with an innate connection to our primary caregivers and these attachments early in life set the stage for relationships as adults (Wagner & Hurst, 2018). Ainsworth's research connected the nervous system with Bowlby's attachment styles. When the nervous system is aligned, that attachment is referred to as secure. When the nervous system is under constant traumatic exposure, and frequently experiences the flight/fight state it is called anxious/ambivalent attachment. When traumatic exposure is associated with the shut-down system, it is called anxious/avoidance attachment style (Wagner & Hurst, 2018). If individuals seek a partnership and a relationship is developed, then the journey of attachment that began when one was a baby becomes regenerated and integrated with another's attachment system (Wagner & Hurst, 2018).

Through the dimensions of anxiety and avoidance, people will score either high or low, and individuals can be categorized into one of four different attachment styles. Individuals who score low in both anxiety and avoidance will generally have a secure attachment style. Those who score high in both anxiety and avoidance will have an anxious-avoidant attachment style. Those who score high in anxiety, but low in the avoidant dimension have an anxious attachment style. Finally, those who score low in anxiety, but high in avoidance have an avoidant attachment style (Grau & Doll, 2003).

These four styles of attachment all show love and engagement in intimacy. Those who have an anxious attachment style, might tend to fall in love at first sight with a person, to become

jealous easily, and may be perceived as clingy as they focus their attention on their partner assessing whether they are showing enough affection or not. They can also wish for more intimacy than they receive and will blame their partners for the lack of intimacy. In fact, the anxious attached person will often blame their partners for not fulfilling their individual emotional needs and claim that the partner is being unsupportive. In comparison, those who have an avoidant attachment style tend to have a desire to be self-sufficient and handle their problems on their own, as they put significant value into having their own autonomy. With their partners, those who have avoidance attachment tend to have frequent conflicts with their partners as their partners demand more intimacy. They also tend to avoid close emotional relationships, and desire to have a lower level of intimacy. They often have a challenging time accepting their partner for who they are. Their level of commitment and investment to the relationship is low as they do not expect the level of attachment to work and then they feel guilty for their lack of investment (Grau & Doll, 2003). Therapy can trigger movement rhythm patterns of dysfunction of early childhood attachment concerns within a romantic relationship, but through triggering the dysfunctional dances it gives the couple time in therapy to repair the dysfunction (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019a).

Grau and Doll's (2003), study was conducted with one hundred and six participants, fifty-three males and fifty-three females, ages ranging from twenty to sixty-one. This research looked at the interrelationships between an individual's attachment to the equity in the relationship. Out of those one hundred and six participants, all were involved in an intimate relationship ranging from six months to three hundred and sixty months. For their participation in this study, participants filled out a questionnaire at home that used two scales. One scale measured anxiety and the other measured avoidance. The scales were then returned to the researchers in a sealed envelope. The questionnaire used a 9-point Likert scale for rating the

anxiety and avoidant measuring tools. From those questionnaires, individuals were assigned to an attachment style. The study concluded that those who have a higher anxiety attachment correlate negatively to equity and under benefit in the relationship. Those who match with avoidance positively correlated with the equity ratio and over benefited from the relationship. Whereas those who were showing a secure attachment style correlate with results of experiencing an equitable relationship, which means they give and receive throughout their relationship at an equal ratio. The study showed that attachment styles affect whether a relationship is experienced as equitable or inequitable. There is something to note from this study that nothing can be said about whether attachment styles influence the actual treatment of partners regarding equity in the relationship (Grau & Doll, 2003).

In the findings, the researchers connected basic attachment patterns in childhood and close/romantic relationships. They discovered that individuals with secure attachment were high on closeness and autonomy, while insecure individuals with anxious attachments were unable to be close but were characterized with high dependence. Insecure avoidant individuals feared rejection but lacked trust and felt uncomfortable being close to others. Finally, insecure disorganized individuals avoided close relationships but were more dependent and more susceptible to loneliness and depression (Grau & Doll, 2003).

Weger and Tang (2022) argued that people's mental models of relationships, specifically avoidance attachment, and anxiety, were associated with the degree to which they engage in confirming and disconfirming communication with a romantic partner. They suggest that for people to feel confirmed they must be recognized, accepted, and valued by their partner. Confirming communication displays recognition and acknowledgement of the person's situation. In this theory, a partner can confirm their partner with three types of communication: recognition, acknowledgement, and endorsement. In this study, results defined ways for partners

to share disconfirming messages without saying words, such as ignoring their partner, interrupting them in the middle of a conversation, or deliberately doing the opposite of what the partner has requested, which can also be stated as indifference, impervious, and disqualification.

In relationships, perceived confirmation was associated with more positive perceptions of the self and the relationship. This could increase relationship intimacy and marital satisfaction. In contrast, disconfirming communication affected the relationship where the spouse's perception of feeling understood was not affirmed. Weger and Tang (2022) considered people's anxiety or avoidance attachment as a theoretical basis for predicting one's confirming or disconfirming communication in their relationship. They proposed that anxiety attachment reflects rejection or abandonment by a romantic partner. Like Grau and Doll (2003), they suggested that people with high anxiety attachment tend to obsess about their relationships but fear their partner will abandon them or not be responsive when they are in distress. Those who have an avoidant attachment tend to avoid or dismiss close relationships and be reliant on themselves rather than others. Those who scored low on both anxiety and avoidance tend to trust their partners more, forgive more quickly, and were more comfortable relying on others. Attachment models could shape goals for relating to others through availability, affective regularities, and responses to others. Those who were securely attached were more competent in communicating with their partners through an array of communication activities to convey warmth and availability. Those who were not securely attached were more likely to share in disconfirming communication that will invalidate or disqualify their partner and/or their message. They were also hypervigilant for indicators that their partner disapproves of them or abandonment through minor changes (Weger & Tang, 2022).

Weger and Tang's (2022) were interested in examining how romantic partners self-rated levels of anxiety and avoidance attachment associated with their mates' ratings of their partners'



confirming and disconfirming behavior. Through their study they used data from eighty-seven heterosexual couples, whose average age was 25.9, with an average relationship length of 3.5 years, and from various stages of relationships. The researchers measured confirming and disconfirming communication amongst couples through a 35-item instrument that reported the participant's partner's use of various disconfirming messages on a 5-point Likert scale. Attachment style was measured using the "multi-item measure of adult romantic attachment" which consisted of a 36-item Likert-scale items to measure one's anxiety and one's avoidance. The results of the study showed that a partner's level of anxiety attachment emerged as a significant predictor of the perception of their partner's confirming and disconfirming communication (Weger & Tang, 2022). Anxious attachment can also decrease a romantic's partners' willingness or ability to engage in confirming communication. The researchers also found that those who had partners with more avoidant attachment orientations are to engage with less-confirming communication. These people engage in fewer nonverbal behaviors communicating and less nonverbal affection than those who have a more secure attachment. Overall, the study found that romantic partner's anxiety was positively associated with two types of disconfirming communication and was negatively associated with confirming communication. However, the researchers did fail in finding sufficient evidence that a partner's avoidance attachment influences their disconfirming communication but did find a conditional main effect for the negative association between a partner's avoidance attachment and their confirming communication (Weger & Tang, 2022).

The research suggested that for those who have anxiety attachment, their anxiety may operate differently at different stages of the couple's relationship as time progresses (Weger & Tang, 2022). For partners who have anxiety attachment, their anxiety may reduce over time in the relationship as the relationship turns into a more secure one. Therefore, the connection

between anxiety attachment and sexual satisfaction showed an indirect pathway. The anxiety becomes less about self-worth and concerns about being rejected by the partner and more about being mutually beneficial for the partner. Meanwhile, those who suffer with avoidant attachment may be led to more frequent deactivation strategies as they are triggered by sexual interactions with their partner because it opens a level of vulnerability that they try to avoid (Weger & Tang, 2022). Since there was a direct correlation between sexual satisfaction and avoidant attachment, and not a direct pathway from sexual satisfaction and anxiety, the research suggests that those who have avoidant attachment have more deterrents to sexual satisfaction in a long-term relationship. Further research suggests creating a developmental stages framework to identify and fully understand the effects of attachment on sexual satisfaction (Péloquin et al., 2024). One consideration is that clinicians could/should educate their clients on their attachment styles and the impact they can have on sexual satisfaction throughout the relationship.

### ***Intimacy/Closeness***

Intimacy refers to being with and sharing in the innermost part of self with others (Popovic, 2005). To be emotionally intimate, a person needs to feel heard without judgement. Being sexually intimate is where people share general interest in each other and/or engage in sexual activities (Popovic, 2018). Sexuality and its energies are as vital and instinctual as the need for eating, drinking, and breathing (Lykou, 2018). Sex, originally practiced for relief and pleasure, has become associated with several functions and needs. Sexual intimacy does not have just one behavior or feature (Popovic, 2005).

Closeness includes emotion/affection, overt physical behavior, and verbal, and non-verbal self-disclosure (Popovic, 2005). Closeness needs and desires sexual and social relationships, as it is crucial to a person's happiness, functioning, and health. Those who do not have their needs met can have psychological and sexual disturbances (Popovic, 2005).

The application of intimacy and sexuality in DMT literature is limited. However, it could be that the DMT field has not yet responded to their own inner curiosities and are playing into the perpetuation of the power imbalance of patriarchal theories. Adler was one of the first to mention sexuality in DMT during her address in 1976 at the ADTA conference (Adler, 1976). She was addressing the sexual revolution and the challenges it posed dance/movement therapists (Lykou, 2018). In 1978, Bennet chose to discuss the connections between sexuality and aggression. Bennet proposed that DMT can facilitate the release of fused energy states of sexuality and aggression and their integration (Bennet, 1978). Sandel, in 1979, discussed the topic of sexual issues for the elderly (Sandel, 1979). Lewis-Bernstein, in 1979, discussed sexual identity and how it is understood in ego psychology (Lewis-Bernstein, 1979). While these authors mentioned sexuality, they still did not further the discussion on how a therapist can work with the materials of sexuality with clients (Lykou, 2018). Payne (Payne, 2010) was the first to mention sexuality in professional training and opened the door for more in-depth explorations of obstacles in DMT training in relation to sexuality such as exploring safe boundaries as erotic transference, embodied countertransference, and ethical clinical practices (Lykou, 2018). However, there is still a lack of an over-arching theory encompassing a set of values with the development of a theory of sexuality within DMT.

Sexual satisfaction is a vital part of any romantic relationship as it is a powerful means to express love and to cultivate happiness within the relationship over time. Sexuality can satisfy the needs of attachment and validation while providing stability for the relationship and availability for the partners (Péloquin et al., 2024). In relationships, an individual's sexual experience is affected by their own attachment style and their partner's attachment styles. Attachment insecurities, such as anxiety and avoidance, can get in the way of a partner's expression of love and lead to lower sexual satisfaction with the individual and the couple.

Previous research on sexuality was commonly around younger adults and adolescents and those in short-term relationships. Péloquin et al. (2024) did research on couples who had been in long-term relationships to determine their IEMSS, Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction, components and mechanisms. The IEMSS discusses how a partner's sexual satisfaction is affected through sexual exchanges that are categorized into rewards and costs that an individual experiences during an exchange. Those who experience overall higher satisfaction levels are higher in sexual rewards, which are pleasing and gratifying to an individual, versus sexual costs, which demands more physical, or mental effort, or can cause pain. According to the IEMSS those who have higher satisfaction also experience what they expected in rewards versus cost, and they perceive greater equality between their and their partner's sexual rewards and costs (Péloquin et al., 2024).

The goal of Péloquin et al. (2024) study was to examine the links between attachment and long-term couples' sexual satisfaction twelve months later. The sample for this study consisted of one hundred and fifty-three Canadian mixed-gender couples who have been in a relationship for at least five years, cohabitating for six months, and have engaged in sexual intercourse at least once a month for the past six months. Additionally, each participant needs to be eighteen years of age and access to the internet to complete daily diaries. The measures used for this study were the background questionnaire, attachment through a brief version of the Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire, Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction using the Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction (GMSEX). The procedure for the study was as follows; the couples partook in an initial telephone session to verify eligibility, then each partner in the relationship was sent individual links to a survey to complete, independent from their partner. This survey was repeated after each follow-up assessment. Using the SPSS 27 the preliminary analyses were completed. To examine the association between

attachment insecurities and components of the IEMSS, the researchers used the Mplus 8.2. to account for non-normality with the main variable, Robust maximum-likelihood estimation was used. The results of the study showed that on average participants reported low levels of avoidance. The men reported an average of low levels of anxiety attachment and woman reported anxiety levels in clinical range. Also, on average, participants reported high sexual satisfaction, a favorable balance of sexual rewards to cost, and that the partners felt that their and their partner's cost and rewards were equal (Péloquin et al., 2024).

The findings of the research showed that both men and women who had avoidance attachment, but not anxiety attachment, were associated with lower sexual satisfaction twelve months later from the original survey. As anticipated by researchers those, both men and woman, who had attachment insecurities, avoidance, and anxiety, were both associated with less favorable sexual exchanges. In the research question between how partners affect attachment insecurities and the IEMSS exchange components, researchers found that with men who had attachment insecurities were associated with their partner's less favorable sexual exchanges, and women were more associated with their partner's more favorable sexual exchanges. In their research examining attachment-based partner pairing, they found a significant moderation effect. Women's avoidance attachment moderated association between men's anxiety attachment and their perceived equality of rewards with their partner. Finally, the researchers investigated the extent to which the IEMSS exchange components explained the association between attachment insecurities and sexual satisfaction over time. The findings exposed several significant direct effects via some of the IEMSS components in both partners. Women's higher anxiety was associated with their own lower satisfaction through their own lower perceived equality of sexual rewards between partners. Men's higher anxiety attachment and avoidance attachment were

associated with their own lower sexual satisfactions through their own less favorable perceived balance of sexual rewards and costs (Péloquin et al., 2024).

Schmid, a person-centered theorist, suggested that sexuality is connected to one's actualizing tendency. DMT theorist, Payne, made a similar point that connecting DMT intervention Authentic Movement to the person-centered concept of congruence involves the process of one's own person much like sexuality (Lykou, 2018). However, there is an absence in DMT literature on Authentic Movement and active imagination with the respect to sexual fantasies and the expressions of inner conflict. Is it possible to allow the clients to move into the range of sexual fantasies without there being a veil of shame and anxiety around it, particularly because DMT is a body-based psychotherapy modality (Lykou, 2018). It is the dance/movement therapist's responsibility to understand sexuality and the limitations faced in different cultures (Lykou, 2018).

What causes tensions and problems within relationships that affect intimacy/closeness? The term closeness is complex and determined by multiple biological and social factors (Popovic, 2005). There could be biological factors that affect one's ability to be close such as: sex chromosomes and abnormalities, neurological, vascular, hormonal, pelvic problems, mood disturbances, etc. (Popovic, 2005). There can also be societal factors such as: religion, politics, and other societal "scripts" that may cause these responses as well. Finally, psychological factors contribute to one's relationships of intimacy and closeness with another (Popovic, 2005). For children, their relationships with their parents will impact their ability to form close relationships throughout life (Popovic, 2005). These relationships typically lead to separation anxiety and avoidance of closeness that will affect one's personal intimate relationships. In their study of nine heterosexual couples who engaged in twelve sessions of dance/movement therapy, researchers Shuper-Engelhard and Vulcan (2018) found that the movement allowed the partner to take a

break from daily routines and begin to attain a sense of joy over their own and their partner's bodies, which increased bodily sensations and re-awakening bodily needs and empathizing pleasure.

People's attachment models shape the way they interact and shape their priorities in their relationships such as affection, inclusions, and intimacy, which influence how the relationship interacts. Those who have higher avoidant attachment will minimize intimacy and are less likely to create closeness with another (Weger & Tang, 2022). Those who are anxiously attached pursue confirming communication and avoid disconfirming communication to increase intimacy. Those who are wanting intimacy but fearing the risk of rejection inhibit at least some of the behavior accompanying explicit endorsement and recognition of a partner (Weger & Tang, 2022).

Lykou (2018) explored how sexuality has been addressed or the lack of addressing it in the DMT literature and physical practice. Her research explores if there is a barrier to the exploration of sexuality within DMT which has meant that we have not kept up to date with relevant psychotherapeutic, mental health and political developments. If barriers do exist, then does this block the fullness of the work a therapist can do with their clients? Serlin viewed sexuality in DMT as one of the sacred channels for the power to enter the person' to give a wider and deeper context for bodily processes (Lykou, 2018).

Regarding childhood development and sexuality, dance/movement psychotherapists have failed to integrate some vital parts of psychodynamic and other theories relating to sexual drives and sexuality in childhood. Lewis-Bernstein described a client's expression of sexuality in terms of tension flow rhythms and attributes taken from the Kestenberg Movement Profile. Her work was a profound example of the connection between movement analysis, psychological theories, and the therapeutic relationship with sexuality as a focus (Lykou, 2018). While there has been

some discussion around Kestenberg Movement Profile connecting the sexuality of the inner and outer genital phases and their corresponding tension flow rhythms, there has been no connection expanded upon to cover how the rhythms can impact the development of a child's sexuality or how it can unfold into adulthood and be dealt with in therapy on the body-mind continuum.

### ***Mirroring***

Mirroring is a technique integral to the practice of DMT. Mirroring is a multi-faceted therapy technique that allows for enhanced activation of mirror neuron areas compared to simple social mimicry (McGarry & Russo, 2011). According to Lacson (2020), mirroring is a keystone to the practice of DMT for creating empathic relationships with clients. Mirroring itself occurs when two people match the other's body movement with similar shapes, and the timing is coordinated or slightly echoed (McGarry & Russo, 2011; Sandel & Chaiklin, 1993). When used between therapist and client or amongst a group setting it can help to enhance emotional understanding and build trusting relationships (McGarry & Russo, 2011). For the therapist, mirroring is a means of inviting clients to listen to their bodies' gestures and to arouse their curiosity so that they engage in further thinking about the sensation/emotion/image/memory for which the movement brings forward. Due to the nature of mirroring, focusing and attuning to another individual through the exchanging and engaging in like movement of the spouse, the partner can get to know their partner's body stories through kinesthetic empathy (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019a).

Research presented by McGarry and Russo (2011) proposed a neuropsychological model, involving motor simulation and the mirror neuron system, which can elucidate the benefits of mirroring in DMT on empathy. Motor simulation from person to person can re-create another's emotional movement in similar motor areas of our own brain. This allows for a person to project how they feel during the execution of the movement (McGarry & Russo, 2011). Overall,



mirroring can enhance empathy and lead to stronger action observations by increasing activation in the mirror neuron system (McGarry & Russo, 2011). In a research study done by Shuper-Engelhard and Vulcan (2019) one partner, Nathen, from one of the nine heterosexual couples who participated described mirroring as difficult no matter how well he knew his partner. However, he felt like he was understanding her through her body, but through a different language (Shuper-Engelhard & Vulcan, 2019). Somatic mirroring can also summon relaxation and availability to one's partner along with identifying and naming emotions, and arousing intimacy and desire for another (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019a).

In the DMT field, somatic mirroring is an important intervention used (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019b). Somatic mirroring makes use of the knowledge embodied in the body; it is possible to encounter what arises in the soma but did not yet undergo the process of representation in the psyche. Movement of the body is the soma's way to convey the experience that cannot be put into words (Shuper-Engelhard, 2018). Many issues within couples therapy tend to address bodily aspects of relationships including sexuality, body image, and physical aggression. The use of body-movement in the couple's interactions can be used as an effective part of communication. One way to increase effective body communication is through somatic mirroring. By bringing awareness to bodily sensations, it is possible to be in touch with pre-verbal emotions and memories (Shuper-Engelhard, 2018). Somatic mirroring, which is a form of verbal mirroring that integrates somatic-kinesthetic aspects, has been accepted and used since its development. The use of mirroring allows partners to convey messages to each other in helping keep the emotions regulated while arousing empathy and improving safe communication. It can help facilitate a close and empathic connection and help to ensure that each partner is engaged and attentive to the conversation that is being held with the partner (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019b).

Shuper-Engelhard (2019b) research sought to understand the role of somatic mirroring and kinesthetic empathy play in couples therapy during times of processing. In neuroscience research, researchers have found that mirror neurons, which are the neurons that fire via observing another's behavior, influence the observer. These mirror neurons help the body receive messages through the senses which later the observer can introspectively begin to be aware of what their body is feeling through processing. Through mirroring the researcher found that partners can be attuned and sensitive to the other's kinesthetic expression and that offers the partner the ability to identify the other's emotions (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019b). Through relaxing/holding the body's weight in the session, sculpting of the body around another, leading the movement, gaze and its absence, passivity and activity in the movement can all summon a new understanding of sexuality and level of desire for one another (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019a).

Through the qualitative research conducted by Shuper-Engelhard (2019b), the research aimed to learn more about the importance of the kinesthetic-somatic component in couple communication. How they did that was that they examined how kinesthetic expression enables each member of the relationship to become exposed to their partner's emotional position and to sense the presence of a partner who is empathic towards one another (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019b). Through nine heterosexual couples, eighteen participants total, the study was conducted as a part of a comprehensive research project that examined the incorporation of body movement into the couples' therapy. In twelve one-hour sessions that took place at an academic institution, two therapist who are experts in the field of DMT work with couples and couples therapy had each partner share their experience in the relationship and then through movement express the emotions/needs they had. After each partner went, they were invited to mirror with their body what they heard expressed by their partner. The data from the research was collected three different ways: the use of video recordings from the sessions, notes from the therapists, and

personal diaries from the eighteen participants. After the sessions were completed, the data was analyzed by two researchers using the method recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) to explore emerging themes experienced by the group of participants. Four themes emerged from the data that described the role of somatic mirroring in therapy and in the couple's relationship. First, mirroring creates calm and availability to the partner and to the therapeutic process. Second, mirroring invites familiarity with emotional aspects of the spouse's experience. Third, mirroring arouses intimacy and desire. Finally, fourth, moments of anger towards the partner are characterized by body rigidity and refraining from mirroring. Physically mirroring partner's movements gave the other partner a space to put aside concerns and stresses of daily life and increase their emotional availability for investigating their relationship. For the spouse, whose movement was being mirrored they reported feeling a sense of acceptance and confirmation, which brought about a sense of calmness within their body and greater receptivity to the therapeutic process. Somatic mirroring also provided a chance for the clients to identify the emotions they felt and what their partners were experiencing. By mimicking the spouse's movements and physical position, it increased the client's empathic sensitivity and kinesthetic and emotional experience. It should be noted that within this study, participants who expressed difficulty in mirroring their spouse had difficulty in identifying their partners emotions (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019b).

Mirroring is an intervention that can facilitate the development of secure attachment within a couple's relationship. It is common in mirroring to have one partner start as the designated leader while the other person follows their movements with each partner taking time leading and following (Magness, 2022). It can do this by allowing the partners to attune on an implicit, non-verbal, and body-based level (Lacson, 2020). Mirroring can keep the client present in the here and now of the session through reminding the client what was said, felt, or happened

through the movement (Shuper-Engelhard, 2018). With the use of somatic mirroring a couple can engage in an investigation together by discovering what brings pleasure to them such as the type of rhythmic movement and body and eye contact (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019b). If a partner feels seen and understood by their partner, this will result in them feeling secure, which could lead to them being aroused (Lacson, 2020). When one has secure attachment to their partner, they can connect without feeling suffocated and disconnect without feeling abandoned (Wagner & Hurst, 2018). When couples engage in mirroring that addresses attunement as a theme in their relationship the face-to-face experience allows each partner to be seen by the other (Lacson, 2020). Dance/movement therapists who work with couples need to understand the dances that create a more secure attachment and that are more functional use of social engagement system biology (Wagner & Hurst, 2018). If the partners can regulate their nervous system through mirroring, they can build a more secure attachment to another, which will lead to more intimacy.

In DMT the therapist provides another embodied experience, accompanying the experience in therapy, providing a secure experience, and facilitating the encounter of more complex processes in the relationships and with intimate aspects threatening the relationship (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019a). In somatic mirroring, therapists will encounter regions of the patient's body where there is movement or the absence of it (Shuper-Engelhard, 2018). There are two types of mirroring that therapists could ask their clients to engage in. The first type of mirroring is having the client's partner follow the other partner's movement exactly. The other type is having the partner echo the other partner's quality of movement and reflect the emotional tones. Both types of mirroring may lead to shared activation in the mirror neuron system and be responsible for reported enhancement of emotional connections following a couple's session (McGarry & Russo, 2011). Initial research provides support for the theory that the effects of

mirroring in DMT on empathy occur through enhanced use of mirror neuron circuitry (McGarry & Russo, 2011).

Based on the findings from the Shuper-Engelhard et al. (2019) research article, regarding using dance/movement psychotherapy for couples, found that mirroring points out areas of disconnection and discomfort within the couple's relationship. The use of verbal mirroring of body actions has a centralized role in handling the transitions between movement and between discussion and movement. The centrality of mirroring corresponds to the fundamental role of mirroring in the infant's relationships. The parent's mirroring of the infant's physical gestures connects non-integrated features in the structures of the self to coherent representations of distinct emotional states (Shuper-Engelhard et al., 2019). When mirroring partners in DMT-C, the therapist incorporates the soma and the psyche and verbal and somatic expressions with the goal of supporting their ability to identify emotional states in their relationship and to contemplate them.

### **Discussion**

The research has shown that when couples practice attunement to their partner's movements it could create a sense of intimacy and closeness (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019). The possibility of change became limited when there was fear of intimacy, and the spouse would attempt to control the body and maintain physical distance to avoid it. Additionally, emergence from the cycle the couple is trying to break free from would be trapped in and as a result the partner could further their partner's sense of rejection, abandonment, and anger (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019b). This could further affirm a client's negative attachment style. Partners who are more anxious are more likely to engage in behaviors that reject a partner's perspective through direct or indirect insults, hostile teasing, and self-contradictory messages. With partners who are more avoidant they are less likely to engage actively to encourage a partner to elaborate

on their experience, especially if it is different from their own (Weger & Tang, 2022). For mirroring to be successful, clients need to practice full engagement in the practice build connection in their relationship. Therapeutic strategies, such as Wagner and Hurst (2018), that facilitate closeness may empower and ease couples into working together as a team in confronting their problems (Popovic, 2005). With mirroring, it could start changing the way affirming messages and communications are sent to the other partner. If partners participate equally in the mirroring intervention, it could provide a platform for an equal experience physically, while providing mental and emotional space for each partner to explore.

Research has suggested that mirroring strengthens empathy, cohesion, and connection between therapist and client, and amongst clients (McGarry & Russo, 2011). Therapists engaging and teaching this intervention to couples could be an empowering process for partners in a relationship to learn through the lens of kinesthetic empathy to build intimacy, attunement, and attachment. It is worth noting that while many traditional psychotherapies actively try to avoid countertransference amongst relationships, DMT actively engages in mirroring to enhance somatic countertransference to increase empathic understanding of the individuals (McGarry & Russo, 2011).

There are accessibility considerations for the use of mirroring with clients who may have visible or invisible illness or disabilities. For example, clients who have autism, who have suffered a stroke or have brain damage may have barriers to experiencing empathy or understanding others, even if they were to engage in the mirroring technique. Some literature discussed this dynamic from a perspective of even though there may be participation there could be dysfunctional activation in the mirror neuron system compared to those who do not have autism (McGarry & Russo, 2011). Nevertheless, some recommend that those who have barriers to showing empathy may still participate in the mirroring practice regardless of limitations to

understanding. In addition, it is recommended that these clients should be taught some basic movement analysis tools to aid in the understanding of the practice and assist with empathy enhancement (McGarry & Russo, 2011).

### **Limitations in Research**

There are limitations to the research published on using the mirroring technique with couples to achieve empathy, intimacy, and attunement through attachment. Currently much of the research has relied on participants who are heterosexual and have a White European-American cultural perspective. To better represent intimacy across the general population, there is a need for more research with partners who identify as LGBTQIA+ and to be more inclusive across race and culture. The lack of inclusivity in the research does not offer a well-rounded view on this research topic. For example, Shuper-Engelhard and Vulcan (2019) focused on heterosexual couples who have been in relationships for up to a decade. This does not provide information on how more or less time together may be a factor for couples. Researchers suggested more exploration around this topic of couples therapy and DMT to be involved around different populations, combinations of couples who are in various stages of their lives and relationships to provide more relevant research (Shuper-Engelhard & Vulcan, 2019). In general, research in the DMT field is limited, particularly with the topic of couples. However, the definition of couples and relationships needs to be evaluated in research as roles in relationships continue to culturally shift.

### **Expansions on Research**

In expansions upon the research presented in this literature review considerations for research amongst various populations, relationships, and identities (Popovic, 2005). There is also a need for research to be done around understandings of sexual strivings, sexuality as a body language and an interface between physical and emotional process (Lykou, 2018). Additional

research can be performed looking into intimacy-related disorders and how they can be applied to working with the mirroring technique as they can sometimes suffer from fear of closeness or intimacy (Popovic, 2005). It would also be beneficial for research to be done exploring the link between Attachment theory, Polyvagal theory, and mirror neuron systems as they can be applied to the mirroring intervention to increase attunement, empathy, and intimacy. Future research in how to actively engage in the process of mindfulness with the mirroring intervention of couple's work to continue to increase empathy and compassion not only for each other but for themselves. Suggestions state this could be done through the Meditative Dialogue created by Susan Lord (2017). Finally, further research could include looking into how to effectively teach couples how to read their partner's body language and movement within a matter of sessions versus the years of training in movement analysis like dance/movement therapist.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review has explored the topics of what intimacy, attunement, and empathy are, with a closer look at sexual intimacy, closeness, kinesthetic empathy, rhythmic and affect attunement. Through the discussion of attachment theory, which is connected to empathy, attunement, and intimacy, the literature looked at how mirroring can help those who have negative attachments build positive connections with their partners, regardless of their attachment styles. Mirroring is a method that can change the way partners communicate. It can enhance verbal communication and non-verbal communication. With more research, understanding, education, and practice, dance/movement therapy can become a valuable form of therapy supplementing the more traditional approaches to couple's work.



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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

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**Student's Name:** Lydia Roderick

**Type of Project:** Thesis

**Title:** The Use of Mirroring for Couples Exploring Attuning, Intimacy, Empathy, and Attachment Through Dance/Movement Therapy: A Literature Review

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor:** Chyela Rowe, Ph.D., RDT/BCT